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7 November 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Honorable William P. Bundy
Assistant Secretary for East Asian and
Pacific Affairs

SUBJECT : Report on 6 November Lunch with GVN
Ambassador Bui Diem

Per your 6 November telephone request, I have cabled a report on my lunch with Bui Diem to Saigon and Paris and asked that copies thereof be passed to Ambassador Bunker and Governor Harriman. Attached for your information is the text of that cable.

George A. Carver, Jr.
Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs

Attachment

cc: Mr. Burke

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1. At Assistant Secretary's Bundy's request, I used occasion of 6 November lunch with GVN Ambassador Bul Diem to probe his views on South Vietnamese intentions and, simultaneously, to convey bluntly some home truths about American politics that Mr. Bundy felt might be better transmitted via a personal friend than in an official meeting.

2. Our conversation inevitably commenced with a discussion of election results which provided a natural opening to stress that Mr. Nixon was most unlikely to adopt or follow a Vietnam policy materially different from that of President Johnson who, in any event, remained President until 20 January. Bul Diem concurred emphatically with this view. He acknowledged that some Vietnamese political figures (unspecified) labored under the delusion that Mr. Nixon would take a harder, more hawkish line, but said he had sent a series of long messages home trying to explain why this was simply not the case. He also acknowledged that the President and President-elect were certainly going to work in harmony on pursuing an American policy that transcended domestic political partisanship and, again, insisted he had so informed his own President in Saigon.

3. We then turned to the reciprocal interaction of domestic political factors in both Vietnam and the US. (Throughout our conversation I refused to discuss or comment on recent events that had led to current differences between Saigon and Washington.) Thieu had real political problems at home and limited room for maneuver. His recent actions had unquestionably produced at least short run political benefits for him in Vietnam. These, however, could swiftly sour if Thieu did not now act in a manner that furthered our common aims and not the aims of our common enemy. On the US side, the paramount political task of this administration and its successor was the achievement of national unity. The Vietnam war was one of our primary sources of political divisiveness. Should the

American public come to believe that the GVN was blocking the road to honorable settlement of that war, neither the executive nor the legislative branch of our government could turn a deaf ear to the American people's discontent. Somewhat reluctantly, Bui Diem agreed that this was the case.

4. We then took up Hanoi's strategy and current objectives. I argued that the Vietnamese Communists had fallen on very evil days. They and their cause were suffering severe defeats as a result of allied military pressure, South Vietnamese political progress, and the GVN's increasingly effective attack on the Communists' political apparatus in South Vietnam. Hanoi's only hope of victory now lay in dividing Saigon from Washington and in setting non-Communist Vietnamese at each other's throats. With all we had achieved together at such great cost, it would be suicidal folly to let ourselves be suckered into playing Hanoi's game. Again Bui Diem agreed, but he said we (the Americans) had to appreciate Thieu's problems and internally limited room for maneuver.

5. Thieu had taken the public position (on 2 November) that conditions did not now permit the GVN to take part in the Paris talks. Vietnamese political realities, therefore, required that there had to be some development(s) Thieu could point to as changes creating a new situation. Why could the US not pressure the DRV delegation in Paris to downplay the NLF's role? Emphasizing my lack of official authority to speak on this topic, I answered that while we certainly might lean on the DRV negotiators, I saw no chance whatsoever of their giving ground on this point. Instead, the best riposte to their attack was counterattack. Rather than fretting about Hanoi's propaganda line, Thieu should take a leaf from De Gaulle's book and treat Hanoi's claims for its NLF puppets with indifferent disdain, making it clear through his confident actions that what counted was not Hanoi's persiflage but the fact that Hanoi had been compelled to acknowledge (if not admit) his government's control over South Vietnam.

6. Bui Diem noted that Thieu was a cautious man beset by conflicting advice: some realistic, some not. (Bui Diem here digressed to praise Ky for his current realism and constructive posture.) Thieu was also under great emotional stress. Those around him with cooler heads had to work out a "mise en scene" that would permit Thieu to cooperate in Paris without losing face. Most reluctantly, Bui Diem agreed that the time available for doing this was short. For a few days the American people would be preoccupied with sorting out the election results. After that, trouble could

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soon develop if there was no sign of movement in the negotiation arena. In realistic terms, something had to break within the next week to ten days.

7. Bui Diem raised the idea of a TCC summit conference but recognised that any such affair, hastily convened, could create more problems than it solved. He did think it would be useful, however, if after Thieu had decided what to do, he touched base with all his TCC allies so he could say publicly he was acting in consultation with his fellow heads of state. Bui Diem also asked about the possibility of public statements, or a joint statement, by President Johnson and President-elect Nixon reaffirming American opposition to the concept of enforced coalition government. (One of Thieu's main problems, Bui Diem observed, was his concern that a GVN delegation's participation in Paris in a status equivalent to that of the NLF's delegation inevitably started Vietnam down the slippery slide to coalition government, which meant Communist victory and rule.) Again emphasizing my lack of official authority, I said I was sure my government would give careful consideration to any such suggestions Thieu wanted to make through Ambassador Bunker.

8. Toward the end of our conversation, Bui Diem began to wonder if it would not be a good idea for him to return to Saigon to brief President Thieu on American political realities and offer some suggestions impossible to relay by cable. I encouraged these thoughts. Bui Diem was afraid if he returned to Saigon now it might be misread as a sign of a chill in US-GVN relations. I opined that this would not be the case if his Saigon visit was short and he returned promptly to Washington. Under the circumstances, it would be perfectly natural for him to go home to give his masters a post-election briefing on the American scene. Time, however, was short and the clock was ticking. Bui Diem said he would ask Saigon for permission to return this weekend.

9. As our lunch closed, we discovered we had a mutual fondness for sailing. We agreed that Thieu had recently taken a tack that gave him domestic political advantage of potential overall utility in competition with our common opponents. The GVN was now headed straight for a reef, however, and it was time to come about. On that note we parted.

10. Mr. Bundy requests that the above report on our 6 November lunch be passed to Ambassador Bunker and Governor Harriman.

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13 Nov 68

The Honorable Walt W. Rostow

GACarver, Jr.

Conversation with Ambassador Bui Diem

In compliance with your request during our 12 November conversation, attached is a copy of my memorandum of conversation on my 6 November lunch with Bui Diem. As you will note, at Bill Bundy's request this memorandum was written as a cable to Saigon and Paris.

George A. Carver, Jr.
Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs

Attachment

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